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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000847

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SUBJECT: 2008 UN DROUGHT APPEAL FOR SYRIA

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (SBU) This is an action request cable, see paragraph 7.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: UNFAO (Food and Agriculture) Syria Representative Abdullah Bin Yehia is seeking USG commitment to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2008 Drought Appeal. Yehia proposes to use money from the appeal to provide seed and technical assistance to 15,000 small-holding farmers in northeast Syria in an effort to preserve the social and economic fabric of this rural, agricultural community. If UNFAO efforts fail, Yehia predicts mass migration from the northeast, which could act as a multiplier on social and economic pressures already at play and undermine stability Syria. End Summary.

SYRIAN DROUGHT APPEAL - IN SHORT

13. (SBU) The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched an appeal on September 29 requesting roughly \$20.23 million to assist an estimated one million people impacted by what the UN describes as the country's worst drought in four decades. The appeal details seven major projects that members of the UN country team (FAO, UNDP, WFP, WHO and UNICEF) plan to undertake should funding materialize. Roughly \$14 million is requested to support FAO (\$9.36 million) and UNDP (\$4.82 million) efforts to restore food production and safeguard agricultural livelihoods, and \$5.2 million is being sought by WFP to provide emergency food assistance to the victims of the drought. There does not appear to have been much movement on the part of donor countries to fund this appeal thus far, as most of the funding has come from unearmarked UN funds and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) equaling together roughly \$2.46 million. The Italians have an uncommitted pledge of \$700 thousand for food assistance. Additionally, UN contacts report the Chinese have committed to providing approximately \$500,000, and that the Greeks are considering a contribution of up to \$250,000.

FAO PERSPECTIVE

14. (SBU) UNFAO Syria Representative Abdullah bin Yehia briefed econoff and USDA Regional Minister-Counselor for Agriculture on what he terms the "perfect storm," a

confluence of drought conditions with other economic and social pressures that Yehia believes could undermine stability in Syria. Because he is working with such limited resources, Yehia plans to target FAO assistance to small-holding farmers in the hardest-hit province of northeast Syria, Al Hasakah. (Note: This province shares a northern border with Turkey and a southern border with Iraq. Mosul is approximately 100km from Al Hasakah province.) Because the UN appeal has, thus far, not been entirely successful, Yehia has had to prioritize aid recipients. FAO has about \$1.25 million out of the \$9.36 million sought to begin programmatic work. For now, FAO aid will be awarded only to farmers who meet all of the following criteria: Applicant is head of household, has a holding of no more than two hectares, reports agriculture as the sole source of livelihood, holds no more than seven or eight head of livestock, had a "zero" crop yield for 2008, and has no seed stock for replanting a 2009 crop.

POTENTIAL FOR SOCIAL DESTRUCTION AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

15. (C) Yehia does not/not believe that the SARG will allow any Syrian citizen to starve. (Note: It is estimated that SARG wheat stocks are sufficient to continue to provide subsidized bread in all areas of Syria throughout the coming winter. End note.) However, Yehia told us that the Syrian Minister of Agriculture, at a July meeting with UN officials, stated publicly that economic and social fallout from the drought was "beyond our capacity as a country to deal with."

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What the UN is trying to combat through this appeal, Yehia says, is the potential for "social destruction" that would accompany erosion of the agricultural industry in rural Syria. This social destruction would lead to political instability, Yehia told us. He fears that up to 15,000 rural farmers will fail to plant crops for the 2009 growing season, either because they have no residual seed stock from the disastrous 2008 crop, or because they are hesitant to plant seed (bought on credit) for fear of a repeat of the 2007-2008 cold snap that killed seedlings last year. Another factor at play, according to Yehia, is the rising cost of diesel fuel in Syria, as the SARG continues to reduce subsidies. This translates into rising production costs, providing an additional disincentive for small farmers to maintain their holdings. UNFAO proposes to provide small-holding farmers in Al Hasakah province who meet the above criteria (see paragraph 4) with seed stock and technical assistance so that they might realize a 2009 crop and remain on their farms for the foreseeable future.

16. (C) Without direct FAO assistance, Yehia predicts that most of these 15,000 small-holding farmers would be forced to depart Al Hasakah province to seek work in larger cities in western Syria (Damascus and Aleppo, primarily). Approximately 100,000 dependents -- women, children and the elderly or infirm -- would be left behind to live in poverty, he said. Children would be likely to be pulled from school, he warned, in order to seek a source of income for families left behind. In addition, the migration of 15,000 unskilled laborers would add to the social and economic pressures presently at play in major Syrian cities. A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may not be able to absorb another influx of displaced persons, Yehia explained, particularly at this time of rising costs, growing dissatisfaction of the middle class, and a perceived weakening of the social fabric and security structures that Syrians have come to expect and - in some cases - rely on.

17. (SBU) ACTION REQUEST: Post received several queries as to whether the U.S. intends to contribute to the 2008 Syrian Drought Appeal, and we request department guidance on the matter. UNFAO is seeking immediate donor commitments that will allow them to borrow against the UN CERF. According to

Yehia, UNFAO is trying to get seed stock to farmers in Al Hasakah by mid-December to ensure that they do not miss the window for planting a 2009 crop.

18. (C) COMMENT: Given the generous funding the U.S. currently provides to the Iraqi refugee community in Syria and the persistent problems WFP is experiencing with its efforts to import food for the refugee population, we question whether limited USG resources should be directed toward this appeal at this time.
CONNELLY